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BACKSCATTERING AND RADIATION-INDUCED X-RAYS FOR
DETERMINING SURFACE COMPOSITION AND STRUCTURE

by

SIGMUND BERK

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Abstract

The use of promethium-147 beta backscattering to measure the thickness of plastic coatings on copper was determined. Backscattering radiation was also used to determine the structure and surface composition of copper specimens. A preliminary study of the use of beta-particle backscattering and beta-particle-induced X rays for measuring corrosion is described.

Radiation Backscattering And Radiation-Induced X Rays for Measuring Surface Composition and Structure

By SIGMUND BERK

Pitman-Dunn Research Laboratories, Frankford Arsenal, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Introduction

The literature on beta and gamma backscattering and radiation-induced soft X rays has become extensive. In October, 1964, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission and the Illinois Institute of Technology sponsored a symposium on low-energy X rays and gamma sources and their application.[1] A number of papers on radiation backscattering were presented at the second Geneva Conference.[2] R. H. and D. C. Müller contributed some excellent work on the relative backscattering of the elements and of a number of compounds.[3, 4, 5] Their work resulted in a systematic study of radiation backscattering and produced a number of analytical applications of the method by others.[6]

In this article a number of applications of a promethium-147 beta-particle backscattering gauge are described. The effect of thickness of plastic films on metal was measured by backscattering radiation. Also, the contamination of copper surfaces and their surface structure were determined by beta-particle backscattering. Results of preliminary experiments on the use of backscattering by beta particles and beta-particle-induced Kα X rays for measuring corrosion are reported.

Beta-Particle Backscattering

A brief description of the char-acteristics of beta particles and of beta-particle backscattering is given below. Beta particles are high-speed electrons which have their origin in the nucleus of certain radioactive elements. Of the large number of radioisotopes (more than 900), there are only 16 pure beta-particle-emitting radioisotopes commonly available, and of these only a small number are suitable for sources for backscattering studies. The most commonly used are listed in Table I. Aebersold and Fowler[7] limit the number of (beta- and gamma-emitting) radioisotopes suitable for transmission and reflection gauges to six (Sr-90, Tl-204, Kr-85, Co-60, Cs-137,

TABLE I

Pure beta-particle-emitting radioisotopes useful in backscattering

Radioisotope	Half-Life	Maximum Energy (Mev)
Sr-90	25y*	0.61
Y-90	2.5d*	2.18
Tl-204	4y	0.76
Pm-147	2.6y	0.223
S-35	87d	0.167
C-14	5568y	0.155
P-32	14.3d	1.7
H-3	12.5y	.018

*d = days
y = years

Ir-192). Of these only the first two are pure beta-particle emitters.

The penetration of beta particles through matter is a complex phenomenon due to the many ways that interactions occur.[8, 9] The actual path of the beta particle in a substance cannot be predicted. When beta particles strike a surface, they are absorbed or scattered by the atoms in the material. Some of the beta particles return in the general direction they came from (this is backscattering); however, the intensity of the scattered beta radiation will be largest in the forward direction from the source.

The backscattering is not a reflection in the optical sense, since the reflection does not occur in the surface layer but is a volume phenomenon. Backscattering increases with increasing thickness of the target until saturation occurs. Saturation occurs when the reflecting layer is about one-third of the beta-particle range in the material.[10] Further increase in thickness does not add to the reflected intensity. In backscattering, the beta particles must not only penetrate the entire thickness of material at saturation thickness, but also return through the same thickness to reach and actuate the radiation detector.
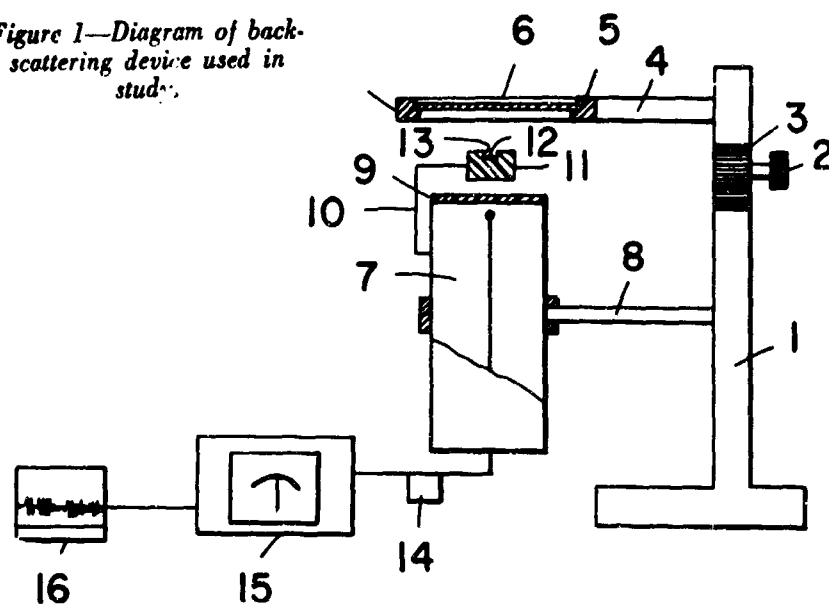
There is no difference in backscat-

film or coating of a product with an average atomic number less than the base metal shows less backscattering than that obtained with the uncoated metal. In order to illustrate this, various thicknesses of Mylar film, which has a $\overline{Z}$ of 6.3 and is therefore comparable to many expected corrosion products, were placed over an uncorroded mechanically buffed copper disk and the amount of backscattering measured. Table III shows that the decrease in the amount of beta backscattering radiation obtained is a function of the thickness of the Mylar film used.

Figure 2—Exploded view of methyl methacrylate plastic assembly for the radioactive source, sample holder, and counter.

tering from a substance in liquid or solid state despite density differences. When the radioactive source consists of materials of high Z number, the effect of scattering in the source itself must be considered.

The range of beta particles in air is several meters, depending on the energy of the particle. However, range is usually expressed in equivalent thickness or mg per cm^2 of an absorber. For low Z elements or materials (aluminum, mica) the absorption thickness is almost independent of the nature of the absorber. It has been evident for some time that the backscattered intensity is dependent on the nature of the scattering material, i.e., the saturation level increases with increasing Z. In addition Müller[3] showed that the backscattering of beta particles is a discontinuous function of Z but linear in Z within each period of the periodic system.

Müller found that backscattering could be calculated for any compound using an average atomic number ($\overline{Z}$), or % backscattering. For example, $\overline{Z}$ for iron is 23.387 and for iron oxide (F_2O_3) it is 16.393. The % backscattering for rusted iron is approximately 30% less than that of iron.

Beta Backscattering Gauge

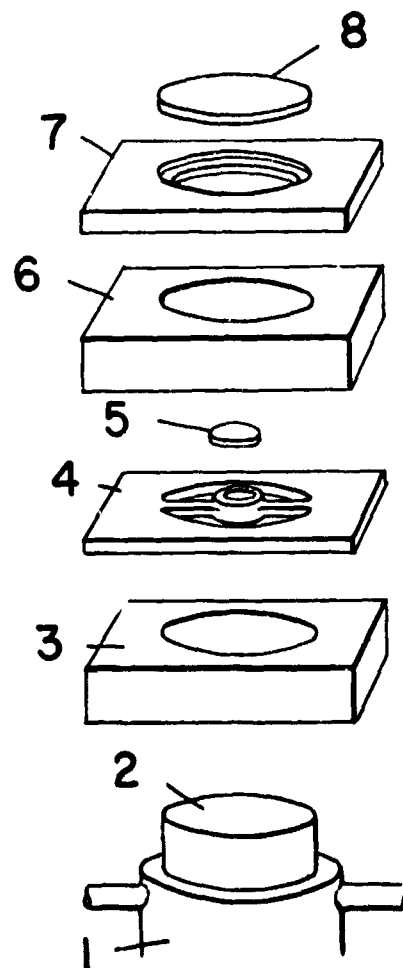A 1.9 mg/cm^2 mica end window

(Geiger-Müller) counter connected to a preamplifier and a scaler was used. Figure 1 is a diagram of the backscattering instrument used. An exploded view of the methyl methacrylate plastic assembly for the radioactive source, sample holder and a proportional gas flow counter assembly is shown in Figure 2. The size of the samples used ranged from $\frac{1}{2}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. in diameter. Larger samples can be measured by increasing the diameter of the radioactive source. The optimum distance between the target and detector was found to be 14-15 mm (Table II), and the source-to-target distance ranged from 7.9 to 8.9 mm. Figure 3 shows the effect of varying source-to-target distances on the backscattering of Pm-147 beta particles from a 530 mg/cm^2 aluminum target.

The source holder consisted of a 5/16-in. diameter methyl methacrylate disk with a $\frac{1}{8}$-in. diameter and $\frac{1}{8}$-in. deep cavity for adding the radioactive material. The radioactivity of the promethium-147 used ranged from 0.3 to 5.0 microcuries. Promethium-147 has a half-life of 2.6 years and a maximum energy of 0.223 Mev. The cavity was covered with a cellophane window approximately 7.5 mg/cm^2

Effect of Thickness of Mylar Films on Copper on Backscattering. A thin

TABLE II

Effect of varying target-to-detector and source-to-target distances on backscattering of Pm-147 beta particles from a 530 mg/cm² aluminum target[a]

Distance of Target to Detector (mm)	Distance of Source to Target (mm)	Net Counts/Min[b]
0.05	2.9	500
10.05	3.9	1100
11.05	4.9	9500
12.05	5.9	19000
13.05	6.9	23000
14.05[c]	7.9	24000
15.05[c]	8.9	24000
16.05	9.9	22000
17.05	10.9	21000
18.05	11.9	19000

[a]Distance from source to detector (fixed at 6.15 mm), measured with a Gaertner Telescope Cathetometer.
[b]Background of source was 2300 c/m.
[c]Optimum distances.

TABLE III

Effect of various thicknesses of Mylar film on beta-backscattering from a mechanically buffed copper disk.

Thickness of Mylar, mils	mg/cm²	Net c/m × 10⁻³⁴	% Decrease in backscattering
0	0	33.8	....
.25	.88	29.0	14.2
.35	1.24	25.5	24.6
.50	1.77	24.2	28.4

[a]Total count was 100,000; BG = 2800 c/m.

TABLE IV

Effect of surface finish on backscattering of Pm-147 beta particles from one inch copper disks

Surface	Net c/m × 10⁻³⁴
Etched (2H₂SO₄, IHNO₃, 5H₂O)	33.6
Sandblasted	31.1
Electropolishing (H₄PO₄)	33.8
Mechanical Buffing (FeO)	35.8
Control (not cleaned)	33.7

[a]Total count was 100,000; BG = 2800 c/m.

Effect of Cleaning of Surface and Surface Finish on Backscattering. An experiment was performed to determine whether any differences in backscattering would be obtained from copper disks with surfaces cleaned by a number of mechanical and electrochemical methods. Table IV shows that no appreciable differences in the amount of backscattering were obtained from the metal disks cleaned by three different methods. However, the samples sandblasted had 7.7 per cent less backscattering than the untreated control. This decrease in backscattering is attributed to the presence of low Z atoms of silicon and oxygen from the sandblasting on the surface of the copper, and to the presence of pits.

The sandblasting produces pits or cavities in the metal surface. It is known that as the distance of the target (pitted copper surface) to the detector increases the amount of measured backscattering decreases. Also, if the surface of a copper specimen had slight eruptions, scales, or protuberances, the amount of measured backscattering would increase. Backscattering radiation may, there-
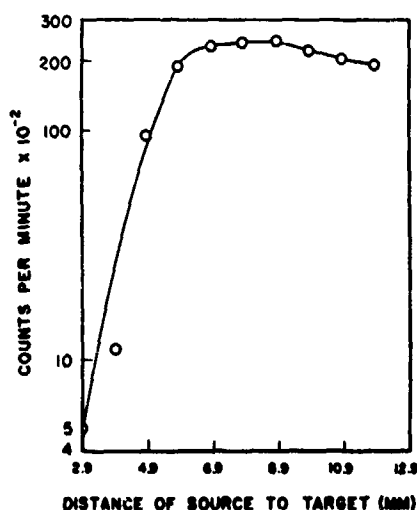

Figure 3—Effect of varying source-to-target distances of backscattering of Pm-147 beta particles from a 530 mg/cm² aluminum target.

fore, be used to measure the surface condition of a metal (cavities, crevices, voids, cracks, flaking, and erosion).

Effect of Surface Corrosion and Oxidation on Backscattering. A number of experiments were done with the backscattering device to determine whether backscattering radiation from promethium-147 beta par-

ticles can be used to show the presence of corrosion on metal specimens. Table V lists the metals used, the surface treatments applied, and the amount of backscattering radiation obtained. The results showed definite decreases in the amount of backscattering from corroded and oxidized metal surfaces. A more detailed study on the use of radiation backscattering and radiation-induced X rays for measuring metal corrosion is described in another article.[11]

Radiation-Induced X Rays

The second method for measuring surface composition utilizes radiation-induced X rays in the specimen. When radiation (alpha particles, betas, protons, electrons, and gammas) interact with the orbital electrons of a material, X rays characteristic of the material are produced. The principle of the method is that on a clean metal surface (such as copper) a maximum number of copper Kα X rays will be induced in a certain volume of the specimen by the radiation. However, if the same metal surface is then oxidized, the volume increases due to the migration of oxygen atoms into the metal. The same volume would

then have fewer metal atoms then before, resulting in fewer copper Kα X rays produced per unit volume.

A number of radiation sources may be used such as polonium-210, americium-241, strontium-90, promethium-147, sulfur-35, thallium-204, carbon-14, hydrogen-3, cesium-137, and cobalt-60.

Beta-Particle-Induced X-Ray Instrumentation. The metal specimens to be examined are placed in a methyl methacrylate sample holder similar in design to that used for the beta backscattering radiation work. A carbon-14 radiation source having an activity of several millicuries was used. The scintillation counter had a 5 mil beryllium window and a 2 mm thick NaI (Tl) crystal coupled to a photomultiplier tube. The pulse-height analyzer was operated at 956 volts with a 5-volt window and a time constant of 50 seconds. A 1000 channel analyzer was used. Suitable single- or multichannel analyzers with high sensitivity to low-energy X rays of one to 100 Kev are also suitable. The multichannel pulse-height analyzer is connected to a scaler, rate meter or recorder.

The radiation detectors used are thin beryllium window scintillation counters and thin window or windowless proportional counters. The source, target, and detector set-up may be operated in air or in an atmosphere of hydrogen or helium for highest sensitivity.

Beta-Particle-Induced Cu Kα X Rays. Salt spray corroded and uncorroded copper specimens were measured for the intensity of the copper Kα X rays (8.047 Kev). It was found that the count rate for the corroded copper was 14 per cent less than that obtained with the uncorroded copper metal. Additional experimental work will be reported in a future article.

If the composition of a brass specimen is desired, the multichannel analyzer would be set to scan for the zinc Kα X ray (8.638 Kev) and

TABLE V

Effect of surface corrosion or oxidation of metals on backscattering of Pm-147 beta particles

Metal	Surface Treatment	Net counts/ min × 10⁻³	% Decrease in backscattering
Copper disk (1″ diam)	Uncorroded	33.6	....
	Oxide by heating in air	31.7	5.7
	Oxide by heating in water	33.3	0.9
	Sulfide	33.0	1.8
	Nitrate by nitric acid reaction	24.7	26.5
	Chloride by hydrochloric acid reaction	29.0	13.7
	Salt spray exposure	25.9	22.9
Steel disk (11/16″ diam)	Uncorroded	17.0	....
	Oxide by heating in flame	16.2	4.7
	Salt spray exposure	13.5	20.6
Niobium foil	Unoxidized	23.9	....
	Oxide (thin coating)	23.0	3.7
	Oxide (thick coating)	21.9	8.4

then for the copper Kα X ray. The ratio of the intensities or count rates of the two Kα X rays would show the percentage composition of zinc and brass in the specimen.

Every element has a characteristic Kα X ray of known energy. If an unknown material is to be analyzed, the entire energy spectrum is scanned. The presence or absence and the amount of any element is determined by the peak height at a particular energy level.

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